

# What is 'Socialist Freedom'?

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*It makes little sense to use the expression socialist freedom in the same way as one uses the expression bourgeois freedom. There is nothing specifically 'socialist' about the freedom sought by the Chinese students nor about those promised by perestroika and glasnost. If by 'socialist freedom' is meant the right to build a socialist society or the freedom required for building such a society then one can legitimately ask whether it is this freedom that Lech Walesa or the Chinese students want or Gorbachev desires to institutionalise.*

There are two reasons for welcoming Manoranjan Mohanty's detailed statement of his position (June 17) on the recent Chinese developments; one, that it lifts the discussion to a meaningful level from the cynical asides and snide remarks that have constituted most of the comments even in left circles; and two, that those who read with a distinct sense of disbelief his brief piece in *Frontier* (June 25) are now assured that it is a seriously held viewpoint. There are, equally, two reasons for hesitating to react to his analysis; one, that very few of us can match Mohanty in his knowledge of Chinese politics; and two, that the spirit behind this reaction can easily be condemned as belonging to that genre of Marxism that 'will never learn anything'. And yet, when the gap in the understanding of persons all of whom equally profess to be Marxists has grown so wide, it is necessary that somebody puts aside all hesitation.

Let us pose the issue in the form of a few questions: (i) Is the contradiction between the state and the people central to the problems of socialism? And is it right to understand the major issues in the history of the socialist revolution — Stalinism, the Chinese cultural revolution, Solidarity, perestroika and now Tiananmen Square — in terms of this contradiction? (ii) Granted that the Chinese students are fighting for some kind of freedom within Deng's political system, is that the same thing as fighting for 'socialist freedom'? More generally, do the phenomena such as Solidarity in Poland and perestroika in the Soviet Union represent an aspiration for 'socialist freedom', or do they, on the contrary, signify certain natural consequences of the abdication of the socialist ideal? (iii) Is it not a species of double make-believe to first of all accept the celebration of the market and material incentives, consumption and modernisation,

as all part of 'socialism anyway, and then hail the political and administrative reforms that are either demanded or necessitated as a consequence of a new wind of 'socialist freedom'? (iv) What is 'socialist freedom'? Indeed, what is socialism, and what does freedom mean in the context of socialism? Is socialism merely a system that provides a "greater possibility of the elimination of multilateral domination", and that too for the reason that it is led "by an organisation committed to the cause of the oppressed classes"? What happens if this organisation starts believing — or professes to believe — that socialism can equally be achieved by capitalist instruments ?

There can be no two opinions about condemning the June 4 massacre. Killing of unarmed people would be condemnable even if they were counter-revolutionaries, but as it is, Deng being the biggest counter-revolutionary in China, it is ridiculous to call his opponents by the same name. Mohanty will perhaps disagree with this, but we are at least agreed on condemning the massacre. But this agreement makes no material difference to the questions raised above.

There is no point in seeking solutions to the problems of Marxist practice outside the framework of Marxism. Marxism has always viewed socialism as a transitory phase, a historical interregnum, that will work towards the goal of communism, in which all forms of oppression, inequality, bondage and alienation will come to an end. Even if we interpret this seemingly teleological notion as an ideal, a vision that we strive for the meaning of socialism as a *continuously revolutionising phase of history* is not altered. Indeed, there is no teleology here for the millennium does not come at the end but is built in the course of the interregnum. And it has always been held by Marxists that this transition cannot be effected by the *spontaneous working of any formal structure*, an impossibility that is not remedied by attaching the label 'socialist' to the structure, but only through the leadership and guidance of the *revolutionary proletariat*. It is necessary to emphasise the very real difference between this and the liberal political understanding, for it is here that the real problem of democratic rights in a socialist society lies. The idea of a conscious and organised revolutionising process as the vehicle of change is essentially antithetical to the *bourgeois* notion that change is effected through the working of institutions that reproduce themselves through the actions of free individuals. 'The Invisible hand' of an equilibrating rationality is as central to *bourgeois* political thinking as it is to *bourgeois* economic theory. The *bourgeois* notion of freedom is situated in this understanding of history, and its claim to rationality as distinct from its commendation on moral grounds — stems from this understanding.

This point, to repeat, is central to the concern of rights in a socialist society, and for this reason it appears to make little sense to use the expression socialist freedom in the same way that one uses the expression *bourgeois freedom*. There is nothing

specifically 'socialist' about the freedoms sought by the Chinese students, nor about those promised by perestroika and glasnost. The freedom of association, freedom of conscience, freedom of expression and the freedom of assembly are all good old *bourgeois freedoms*, and so for that matter is the people's right to have a say in how they are governed. The last of these rights was first guaranteed in the Magna Carta ("scutage or aid shall be levied in our kingdom only by the common counsel of our kingdom" says chapter 12 of the Charter) and the rest of them recur again and again in the history of the English, American and French revolutions. If citizens of the socialist world are further driven by their existence to claim protection against forcible self-incrimination, double jeopardy and arbitrary detention and exile, then those rights do not for that reason become some superior thing called 'Socialist freedom', for it was for these guarantees that the English Lords and later the Commons fought their kings from John to James II, literally ages ago.

On the other hand, if by 'socialist freedom' Mohanty means the right to build a socialist society or the freedoms required for building such a society, then quite apart from the fact that this freedom is quite a different thing from what we mean by freedom in *bourgeois society*; one can legitimately ask whether it is this freedom that Lech Walesa or the Chinese students want, and whether it is such freedom that Gorbachev desires to institutionalise. Is that true? Do these 'new winds' blowing across the socialist countries seek freedom to do away with inequality, oppression and multi-lateral domination? Is this "the message of the contemporary upsurge in the socialist countries"? That seems a tall order. The question is not whether they desire an end to these inequities — most people do, at least when you interview them for a public audience. The question is, when these people use the expression freedom — or its institutionalised equivalent, democracy — are they seeking the freedom and the appropriate structures that will enable the people of those countries to put an end to inequality, oppression, and domination, i.e., to build communism? One only has to pose the question this way to realise that the answer is in the negative. They are demanding rights the same way that people in western countries demanded them a few centuries ago. It is not correct to say that one should not describe as *bourgeois* every effort to win more rights in a socialist country. If it is *bourgeois rights* that are sought then it is *bourgeois* that one should call them, and the correct point that one must then make is that everything that is *bourgeois* in its origin need not be condemned. It can be legitimately held, for instance, that the provision of a *writ of habeas corpus* is a must in any civilised country, but it nevertheless will remain a right won for civilisation by the *bourgeoisie*, and will not get transmuted into a socialist right by the mere fact of a Wang Dan or a Xiong Yan demanding it.

But let us pursue further the notion of socialist freedom. The right to build an

egalitarian society is perhaps the one absolute right in a socialist society (though how it would translate into the kind of prescriptive and justiciable rights that alone are allowed the title 'Rights' by *bourgeois jurisprudence* is a moot point), but what exactly are the freedoms that are essential for the effective enjoyment of this right, that are part of the "economic, political and cultural conditions of liberation", in Mohanty's words? For instance, is it the freedom *of* religion or the freedom *from* religion that constitutes a condition of liberation? And what happens when there is a conflict between the two? Or — thinking of, say, Salman Rushdie — is it the freedom to pursue the whims of one's splintered and philistine consciousness that is a condition of liberation, or the freedom *from* the splintering and alienation of consciousness? And again, what happens when there is a conflict between these two freedoms? Or — touching upon a much-maligned aspect of the *cultural revolution* — do we demand the freedom to pursue unhampered one's profession *of* being a seeker of scientific truth, or do we desire freedom *from* the professionalisation of science? And this time we know what happens when there is a conflict between the two; Deng and the Chinese student leaders — in agreement on this one point — have been telling us what happens. Indeed, they *are* partly what happens.

Freedom as understood in the socialist sense is much more often 'freedom from' than 'freedom of', which is not the same thing as saying that socialism is inimical to civil liberties. What it does say is that the socialist concept of freedom demands that we look at the question of civil liberties in a socialist society in its own terms and not in liberal terms. And it is essentially a liberal framework that Mohanty employs when he looks at the major issues of the history of the socialist revolutions, from Stalinism to Tiananmen Square, in terms of the contradiction between the state and the people, in terms of democratisation and socialist democracy. It must be emphasised once again that there is no point in seeking solutions to the problems of Marxist practice outside the framework of Marxism. It is slightly irritating to hear otherwise intelligent people say that a repressive state apparatus may be required for a few years after the revolution, until all the enemies are vanquished, but what is its need after so many decades. If the enemies consisted only of a handful of imperialist agents and big landlords, then no repressive state apparatus would be required even for a few years. But there is a class enemy inside each one of us, and the real problem is how to drive that person out without doing too much damage to ourselves. This latter proviso is not a concession to the self-appointed ombudsman called the west but a real part of the problem, for the 'freedoms from' that Marxism seeks include the freedom from torture, forcible confessions, enforced conversion of faith, etc., which were all rights won by the *bourgeoisie* from feudal rule. Marxism regards the 'freedom from' an unequal, alienated, oppressive and dehumanised existence as primary, but it does not hold

other rights in contempt. Nevertheless, there is a very real problem involved here, and it is unlikely that the processes of revolutionary transformation that constitutes the historical task of socialism will ever be a very pleasant one. It is evidently no longer very fashionable to say that the revolution is not a dinner party, but nevertheless it is *not* a dinner party.

From this perspective, the cultural revolution, whatever else may have been wrong about it, was not wrong because it was a “centrally initiated campaign” nor because it was “launched by one section of the CPC leadership which was engaged in a bitter political struggle with others”. Revolutions, as Mohanty does not need to be told, are never conducted exclusively from above or exclusively from below. And a core concern of a revolution is institutionalised power. If the recent history of the socialist countries has any message it is that this struggle for power does not come to an end with the declaration of a workers’ state. In the continuous struggle to end all inequality and oppression, forces of resistance, forces of counter-revolution, rear their heads again and again, and the struggle against them quickly turns into a struggle in the arena of power, the arena of politics. This is a much more appropriate understanding of the cultural revolution than Mohanty’s reading of it as one attempt to resolve the contradiction between the state and the people. What is the material basis of the forces of counter-revolution remains an unanswered question, despite the vigorous debate that followed the death of Mao and the denunciation first of the Gang of Four, then of the cultural revolution and then of Mao himself, but that such forces exist within revolutionising societies, that *they* do not suffer from illusions about institutionalised power, is revealed in the fact that in all the socialist countries it is they who are now in power. The ‘upsurge’ that Mohanty speaks of is situated within this restoration, this counter-revolution, and its evaluation must take place within that context and not in an imagined context of socialism. If, under such a dispensation, the people want freedom of expression and assembly, multi-candidate elections, and the right to associate and organise, the demands are entirely defensible, but neither do the demands constitute socialist freedoms, nor do those who are in consequence killed by the state become martyrs in the cause of socialism.

The real question of civil liberties in socialist societies must be debated outside the context of these ‘actually existing socialist’ countries for the conditions of the problem have been abdicated by them. Let us forget those countries and think of India. Any revolution in India, we all agree, will have to fight the caste system and caste values. Such a revolution will in all probability claim for itself the freedom to force upper caste bureaucrats to work as *chaprasis* to *harijan* officers at least a couple of days every week; it will further claim for itself the freedom to force all men to wait upon their wives; and also the freedom to force intellectuals to weed crops or carry dung; and the freedom to

force managers of factories to work on the shop floor; notice what new meanings the word 'freedom' has started acquiring (perhaps *this* is 'Socialist freedom?'). But it will be argued that all this must be done by the *harijans*, the women, the carriers of dung and the workers, and not by the state. Quite apart from the fact that this still leaves the question of civil liberties open, what happens if the victims of these freedoms organise themselves and resist the change, not in the name of caste and patriarchy (they would not be stupid enough to do so) but in the name of religion, *dharma*, order, progress, science, modernisation or patriotism? These will not be just a handful of class enemies against whom no prolonged repression will be required, and whom the unarmed masses can face and vanquish. The defenders of religion, order, progress and the nation will be from among the masses themselves, frequently from among the very masses whom the revolution is to liberate. While a socialist society cannot set about exterminating all of them, and must concentrate on exposing the illusory nature of the issues raised, it cannot close the option of violence or at least the threat of it except under exceptional conditions of empathy between the revolutionary masses and the state. It is a suicidal brand of idealism to believe that the revolution can ignore the question of state power and leave it to mass initiative to effect social transformation. The revolution can only be effected by a close combination of the masses and their state, of education and compulsion, of mass initiative and centralised leadership. How to ensure that the basic civil rights necessary for a dignified existence are not violated even for those who disagree with the revolution is a real question that cannot be solved by wishing away the dilemma. Till now Marxists have generally believed that unlike capitalism which reproduces itself through formal institutions, socialism with its revolutionary task can only work through a heightened mass consciousness, awareness, participation and political leadership. It has implicitly been held that institutionalisation of the instruments of revolutionary transformation is impossible or undesirable, except in the case of the overarching guiding spirit, the party. This understanding, which puts too much of a premium on the prevalence of the right spirit and attitudes in the party, has been questioned off and on, and perhaps it is time to open a debate on this matter now, for such institutionalisation would create space for civil rights appropriate to socialism, without leaving them to the benevolence of the party. The lack of such an effort is painfully exposed when, in the course of the continuous struggle between revolution and counter-revolution that defines the mode of existence of socialism, the party either ossifies into a dehumanised bureaucracy or, worse still, ceases to be on the side of the revolution and becomes an instrument of counter-revolution.